

Standardized Spelling and the Gentrification of America

Since the first few decades of the 19th Century, the ability to spell “correctly” has become the indispensable mark of the educated, and therefore worthy, man (or, in modern times, woman). But it wasn't always so. In colonial America, when few people owned books other than the Bible, or read anything but the occasional newspaper (when they could read at all), there was no such thing as “correct” spelling, especially of unfamiliar words, such as surnames not familiar in the locality. Literate, and even educated people, spelled unfamiliar words the way they heard them, with the vowels determined by the local accent—and there was no shame in it.

In Colonial America, there were basically two classes of men: ordinary men, and “gentlemen”—the latter modeled roughly on the lower classes' idea of the English gentleman. Early American “gentlemen” are recognizable to us today by being styled “Esq.” or “Mr.” in the old records. What qualified them as gentlemen was one or more of the following (but these attributes typically went together, as in England): ownership of property over and beyond the requirements of comfortable subsistence; education beyond the rudiments necessary for everyday life; or occupation of important civil or governmental offices. Left out of this list is the one necessary attribute of the true English gentleman: traceable descent from the nobility.

Early Americans were at least inchoate egalitarians and it wasn't, therefore, considered polite to inquire into the ancestry of a putative American gentleman, probably because few such pretenders had any noble, or even gentry, ancestry. Rather, in America, gentlemen were self-made, and everyone knew who they were by their attainments, presentation, and reputation.

Over the ensuing decades, and especially from Revolutionary times, latent American egalitarianism became explicit, and every ambitious young man not born to a father already styled “Esq.” made it one of his life's goals to acquire the marks of gentility, so that he, too, might qualify for the title “Mr.” Most such men headed for the frontier where the cheap land abounded. Lacking settled communities in which to document their rise in status, every ambitious frontier farmer took care to accumulate as many of the material props of gentility as he could possibly afford: most notably, a conspicuous, almost wholly unused, formal parlor, stocked with a fine set of china, perhaps, or at least a few silver spoons that could be trundled out when the minister dropped by for tea after the Sunday service.

This mass movement toward gentility dovetailed nicely with the burgeoning of universal education in the 1830s. Minimal literacy had been all-but-universal in New England from the beginning in the early 1600s, and the Scotch-Irish began establishing secondary institutions during the colonial period, even on the frontier, but as the population ramped up in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War (when immigration also swelled), and spread out into the vast hinterlands, education and literacy lagged behind. When literacy, including the mastery of grammar and spelling, began to be perceived as a necessary mark of refinement, there was a pulling up of socks, and even poor farmer's children attended the one-room country schoolhouse for as many years and months as they could be spared. Thus everyman was to be educated, and qualified thus for his title of “Mr.” (Incidentally, this process has continued to the present day, only now the requirement is a college degree, the qualifications for which have been correspondingly adulterated to accommodate the common man).

Conveniently, it was at about this time that Noah Webster, a scholarly Yale graduate, began publishing the first American dictionaries. His first, in 1812, had a limited circulation, but by 1828, when his second, and much more comprehensive, edition came out, Americans were champing at the bit for authoritative guidance in the matter of validating their pretensions to a gentlemanly education.

“Webster's Dictionary” unexpectedly became a best-seller. And after the legion of new public school teachers embraced it as their Bible, “the dictionary” quickly became our familiar arbiter of

culture and social virtue. So much so, that it we need to expend some effort to think our way back to the way it was before Webster.

Some Guidelines to (Not Over-)Interpreting Particular Name Spellings

Inquiring genealogists want to know: do particular spellings of a surname run in families? If so, surname spellings can be used to buttress a circumstantial case for identity.

My experience tells me that even where family members were taught to spell their surname in a particular way, it was usually the ear and conventions of each particular clerk or recorder that determined how the name actually appeared in the records. And as for the imperative of consistency, one commonly encounters documents where the same surname is spelled several different ways by the same writer. In the exceptional case where the recorder happened to be well read, his spelling would indeed evince a more consistent, if not wholly standardized, spelling, but the exception proves the rule.

The surname GAY

Let us consider two examples. First a very simple one from my own ancestry—the Scotch-Irish GAYs of the mid-18th century western Virginia frontier.

The standard spelling of the surname is unequivocally “Gay”, and “gay” is a common enough word of the language that its standardized spelling thus, probably goes back at least to the first century of readily available printed books. Moreover the Scotch-Irish population of colonial America, notwithstanding the fact that they were in some respects crude and often wild frontiersmen, were great believers in education for all, and minimal literacy or better was the rule in this population.

What we find in the records, however, is that the surname GAY is as likely to be spelled “Guy” as “Gay” (but almost never “Gey” or “Goy”).

At first, until I began to understand the rudiments of what I have written above, I puzzled over this, maintaining a high degree of skepticism that I was dealing with one and the same surname. But when I began to find both spellings in records evidently pertaining to the same well-identified subjects, and indeed, occasionally both spellings in the same record, I began to get the picture. Now, the way I look at it is that the prevalence of the spelling “Gay” is indicative of a more-than-minimal degree of literacy, while “Guy” tell us how the name was actually pronounced; moreover I expect that some of these “Guy” spellings were recorded in spite of such literacy, but in deference to the principle of taking every man initially at his own self-appraisal—a characteristic American frontier trait. Interestingly, both spellings persisted until 1850 and beyond—well after the onset of the fetish for “correct” spelling.

The Surname PIERCE, or PEARCE, or...

The standardization of this surname is evidently a vexed question to the present day. The authorities are agreed that it is derived from Middle English “Piers” (as in “Piers Ploughman”), which is itself derived from the ancient forename “Peter”. But the Oxford surname dictionary tells us that the standard English form of the name is “Pearce”, while in *American Surnames*, and in modern American phone books, we find that “Pierce” is by far the more common spelling (by a ratio of at least 4 to 1). Meanwhile, in old New England, the fountainhead of the American PIERCEs (it was the 32nd most common American surname in 1790), we find a well-established tradition also for the spelling “Peirce”, which persisted well into the 1900s, but has evidently since been “corrected”.

In 1882, Frederic Beech Pierce published his *Pierce Genealogy, ... the Posterity of Thomas Pierce*..[of Charlestown and WoburnMA]. He named as collaborator, Frederick Clifton Peirce who had published his own earlier *Peirce Genealogy*. Note the different spellings of these co-authors' names: not just Frederic/Frederick but Pierce/Peirce. This *Pierce Genealogy* was distinguished from most

other works, both then and now, by the fact that the author made the effort to find original autograph signatures of his subjects, which allows us to peer beyond the rule that clerks determine the spelling of surnames according to their own orthographic preferences.

Moreover, principal author, Frederic Beech Pierce, also commissioned a prefatory note about the various spellings of the surname by one James Mills Peirce, a professor at Harvard, and a contributor to the *NEHGR* (then, as now, one of the leading scholarly journals of its day), and Frederic also inserted his own little preface on the same subject. So what did these gentlemen (self-styled “Esq.”s all) conclude about the relationship of surname spelling to family line?

The Harvard professor and genealogist, James Peirce, opines that “a high degree of uniformity exists in the spelling... in any one family connection.” He also thinks that the spelling of the surname is fairly independent of how it sounds, chiefly because the name was most commonly pronounced (in his time) like “purse” but more often spelled “Pierce” or “Peirce”. He also cites a more old-fashioned pronunciation like the word “pairs”, employed by a few people then still living.

To so divorce spelling from phonetics runs quite athwart my own experience (primarily with the records of the American colonial frontier), but it is, I suppose, consonant with the frequently divergent pronunciation vs. settled spellings of Old England, and can perhaps be accounted for by the long persistence of particular family lines in the same area, as speech sounds evolved over time, which was true also in *New* England, though to a far lesser degree.

Thus Professor Peirce's view has a certain plausibility, at least for the older towns of colonial New England, and I find my theory about the divergence between spelling and pronunciation in old British-rooted names confirmed by Professor Melwyn Bragg, in his recent best-seller, *The Adventure of English*.

In his author's preface, however, Frederic Pierce, who went to the trouble of collecting and studying all those autographic signatures, concludes otherwise: “The matter of the spelling... is entirely a matter of fancy or preference.” By this he means, not an established idiosyncratic tradition (which could run in families, and thus signify for identity), but mere whim, as we see by the next sentence: “There are in existence autographs by the original Thomas, as being spelled in three different ways—Pierce, Peirce, and Pieirce.” Frederic does go on to acknowledge that conventionalized spellings do occasionally seem to run in certain family lines (and these probably in more modern, post-Webster times), but his bottom line is: “The matter of not belonging to the same family on account of not spelling the name the same way, as has been brought forward by some of my correspondents, has no force whatever.”—perhaps overstating his position a bit.

So when it comes to surnames in early American records, *my* bottom line is that you have to think phonetically and disregard spelling *per se*—although it is a convention of scholarship to always spell the name exactly as found in the record, just in case there may, after all, be some significance to the exact spelling.

SOURCES:

- Melvyn Bragg, *The Adventure of English: the Biography of a Language* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2003)
Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992)
Patrick Hanks & Flavia Hodges, *A Dictionary of Surnames* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)
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Elsdon C. Smith, *American Surnames* (1969; reprint Baltimore:GPC, 1994)